SOUTH CAROLINA DUCK SUMMIT APRIL 27, 2026



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SUBMITTED BY
BILLY DUKES, CHIEF OF WILDLIFE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On April 27, 2026, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources' (SCDNR) Wildlife Section, along with partners, convened a meeting of waterfowl habitat managers and other interested parties to discuss habitat management and other issues affecting waterfowl hunting in South Carolina. Partners included the South Carolina Waterfowl Association, Ducks Unlimited, Delta Waterfowl, the James C. Kennedy Waterfowl and Wetland Institute, and the Nemours Wildlife Foundation. Various interests and perspectives were represented, including those of coastal impoundment managers, inland impoundment managers, private landowners, and public water duck hunters. Presentation-style format was minimal, with sessions focused on panel discussions and audience participation to assess perspectives of the various constituent groups with respect to the status of waterfowl hunting in South Carolina. Numerous issues were identified in these discussions, and potential solutions to problems were presented by participants where applicable. Comprehensive notes on the meeting including a table of problems and potential solutions are included below.

OPENING REMARKS & CONTEXT

- **Host:** Billy Dukes (Chief of Wildlife, SCDNR)
- Welcomed attendees to the South Carolina Duck Summit.
- Acknowledged the hosting by South Carolina Waterfowl Association (SCWA), provision of lunch, and organizing partners and speakers.
- **Unique format:** No specific regulatory proposal under discussion, but an open conversation about ducks, habitat management, and hunting.
- Encouraged active participation; provided question/comment cards and an evaluation form (including QR code and paper).
- Distributed annual Waterfowl Status Reports (2023-24 and 2024-25) and third-party Wildlife Management Area (WMA) peer review reports.
- **Opening Speakers:**
  - **David Wielicki (CEO, SCWA):** Emphasized the summit's importance for fostering partnerships and cultural heritage.
  - **Tom Mullikin (Director, SCDNR):** Stressed the challenge of declining hunting participation (now just 4% of SC residents have hunting licenses). Noted the urgency due to rapid state growth and threats to wildlife and heritage.
  - **Legislators:** Representative Philip Lowe and Senator Everett Stubbs highlighted state efforts to repair and protect critical waterfowl habitats post-flood/hurricane, the formation of a dedicated Waterfowl Advisory Committee, and recent record budgets for habitat conservation (~$70 million).

MAIN TOPICS DISCUSSED

SUMMIT PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE

- **No regulatory proposals;** aimed at open dialogue for identifying challenges and brainstorming for collaborative solutions among partners.
- Topics structured to allow frequent Q&A, panel discussions, and collection of both spoken and written feedback.
- The day included overviews from all major waterfowl partners operating in SC, panels on management and hunting experiences, and brainstorm sessions.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS' ROLES AND REPORTS

1. SOUTH CAROLINA WATERFOWL ASSOCIATION (SCWA):

- Wood Duck Nest Box Program
- Habitat and Management Projects
- Education and Outreach
- **Policy and Partnerships:** Key policy work with DU and Delta; part of Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation; supports state youth programs and lottery hunt support (including more than $10,000/yr to the South Carolina Wildlife Partnership Program).
- Economic Impact

2. SC DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES (SCDNR):

- **Mandate:** Primary state advocate and manager for natural resources; manage ~25,000 acres of wetlands for waterfowl.

3. DUCKS UNLIMITED (DU):

- Conservation Delivery
- Land Protection
- Expert Team
- **Science-Driven:** Research collaboration

4. JAMES C. KENNEDY WATERFOWL AND WETLAND CONSERVATION CENTER, CLEMSON UNIVERSITY:

- **Mission:** Research
- **Innovations:** Focus on infrastructure longevity (e.g., rice trunks), contaminants (microplastics, "forever chemicals"), and movement ecology (mallard tracking).

5. NEMOURS WILDLIFE FOUNDATION:

- **Focus:** Manages 10,000 acres essential for waterfowl, predominantly historic rice fields.
- Graduate Research and Outreach
- **Recent Research:** DNA-based diet analysis, rapid food assessment techniques, movement ecology.

6. DELTA WATERFOWL:

- **Core Pillars:** Duck production (hen house campaign, predator management), hunting heritage (R3 programs targeting university students), applied science/research, and the new "Restore the Refuge" initiative focusing on improving duck refuges.

WATERFOWL STATUS AND HUNTER DEMOGRAPHICS

KEY STATE AND FLYWAY DATA (SCDNR PRESENTATION; MOLLY KNEECE):

DUCK HUNTERS (ANNUAL DATA AND AVERAGES FROM 2020 THROUGH 2024):

- **United States:** 985,000 duck hunters
- **Atlantic Flyway:** ~179,000 (18% of US; similar to Pacific/Central Flyways)
- **Mississippi Flyway:** 46% of US duck hunters.

DUCK HARVEST:

- **US:** 11.3 million ducks/year
- **Atlantic Flyway:** ~1.5 million (14% of US harvest; lowest among flyways)
- **South Carolina (annual avg.):** 25,000 active duck hunters; ~196,000 ducks harvested; 12.7% of the flyway's harvest (second to NC).

HUNTER DAYS AFIELD:

- SC hunters average 5.5 days/season in the field, mirroring the flyway average days afield.
- Heavy cumulative pressure on wintering waterfowl, especially in the southern extent of the Atlantic Flyway (SC #3 in hunter-days afield after NC and GA).

HARVEST COMPOSITION (ATLANTIC FLYWAY):

- **Top species:** Wood duck (29%), mallard (17%), green-winged teal (10%), ringneck (9%); others <6%.

WMA/CATEGORY 1 PROPERTIES:

- 12 Category 1 WMAs; 40 Category 2 "walk-in" areas; managed for waterfowl with various access rules.
- **Midwinter survey (2026):** 54,000 ducks counted on Cat 1 properties.
- **2025/26 season:** 1,100+ lottery hunters selected; near-full utilization of hunting slots (~90% utilization rate, even higher at major sites).
- **Category 1 area harvest average:** 3.2 ducks/hunter (up from 2.8 previous season); green-wing teal most harvested species (up 95% over 10-year avg.), pintail (+99%), wigeon (+96%), mallard (+34%).

HABITAT MANAGEMENT OVERVIEW

CATEGORY 1 WMA MANAGEMENT (SUMMARY OF SCDNR & PANEL PRESENTATIONS)

TOTAL MANAGED AREA:

23,000 acres, from the Upstate to coast.

PRIMARY HABITAT TYPES (RANKED BY PREVALENCE):

- **Seasonal Flooded Marsh (Brackish Marsh):** Managed primarily for widgeon grass, dwarf spike rush.
  - Santee Coastal Reserve, Bear Island, Donnelley WMAs
- **Moist Soil:** Managed for millet, smartweeds, sedges.
  - Samworth, Santee Delta, Bear Island, Donnelley, Clemson WMAs
- **Permanent Flooded Submergents:** Managed for water shield and banana waterlily.
  - Bonneau Ferry, Sandy Beach, Samworth WMAs
- **Agricultural Impoundments:** Only 3% of managed acreage; mostly rice, millet, with less than 100 total acres of flooded corn.
  - Beaverdam, Clemson, Broad River, Sandy Beach, Bonneau Ferry, Coosawhatchie, Wateree, Love Farm WMAs
- **Green Tree Reservoirs.**
  - Wateree, Broad River WMAs

KEY MANAGEMENT PRACTICES:

- Intensive site-specific management (water level control, prescribed disturbance, species selection).
- Active use of Marsh Masters, drones, and rapid food assessment protocols (recently adopted for efficient caloric-audit of habitats using Waterfowl Energy Days/WEDs).
- Sanctuary/refuge sections increasingly incorporated on both public/private properties to limit disturbance.
- **Annual area reviews ("peer review" model):** External experts visit each property, review management, provide suggestions for improvement in transparency.

FOOD AVAILABILITY:

- **For November 1 through March 1 (120 days):** Estimated carrying capacity on Category 1 areas was more than 28 million waterfowl/days (enough to feed hundreds of thousands of ducks per day at peak waterfowl abundance).

PRIVATE VS. PUBLIC LAND HUNTING EXPERIENCES

PRIVATE LAND OBSERVATIONS (BRYSON GILBERT & JACK ADDISON):

- Typical private impoundments are 1,000 to 1,500 acres with 270 to 300 acres of floodable land.
- Hunting limited to two days/week, small groups, strategic field rotation, and maintained sanctuaries.
- **Main challenge:** Not food, but lack of resting/refuge.
- **Species:** Green-wing teal critical, but "big ducks" (mallards, black ducks) and diversity define exceptional years.

PUBLIC LAND OBSERVATIONS:

- Increased hunting pressure; public land described as "a war zone" by experienced hunters.
- Etiquette problems (sky-busting, crowding) exacerbate pressure-related declines.
- Earlier in season (Thanksgiving, early December) generally better hunting; quickly deteriorates with increased pressure.

PANEL: PERSPECTIVES ON HUNTING SUCCESS AND CHALLENGES

PANEL INCLUDED PUBLIC/PRIVATE MANAGERS, BIOLOGISTS, AND LONG-TIME HUNTERS.

KEY THEMES AND DIALOG:

SUCCESS DEFINITIONS:

- Evolving priority from bag numbers to overall experience, safety, and passing on the tradition.
- Satisfaction now often tied to bird diversity, quality of company, and ecological richness of habitat.
- Special ducks (mallard, black duck, pintail, mottled duck) mark "banner years" but green-wing teal seen as "bread and butter."

FAVORITE HABITATS:

- Flooded timber/moist-soil with structure and variety widely preferred.
- Unique marshes (delta, coastal) valued for diversity and tradition.

MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES:

- Major contributors: Pressure/disturbance (including from technology, e.g. mud motors), weather unpredictability, and landscape change (urban growth and decline of habitat).
- Controversies around flooded corn, mallard releases, and public vs. private hunter opportunity.

IDEAS FOR REDUCING DISTURBANCE:

- Restrict hunting days, implement sanctuary/refuge system, buffer zones for access (particularly for mud motors), regulate technology.

MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES, CONTROVERSIES & PARTICIPANT PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

OPEN SESSION FOR STAKEHOLDER-IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES:

MALLARD RELEASE PROGRAMS

- Near-universal opposition voiced; concerns about wild genetics and resource "cheating"; possible solution via legislative ban

FLOODED CORN

- Division between private land managers and public hunters over benefits as a habitat management practice versus congregating ducks for shooting purposes and redistribution of ducks away from public waters.

DISTURBANCE

- Concern that both fishing and non-hunting recreation are allowed during critical waterfowl periods.
- **Proposal:** seasonal restrictions for non-hunting disturbance in key duck areas

HUNTER PARTICIPATION/RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

REGIONAL/TIMING MANAGEMENT & DATA GAPS

HABITAT EXPANSION

- Calls to increase state-owned green timber and moist soil areas; consider increasing duck stamp price to fund new acquisitions.

MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

- Sanctuary/refuge use on both public and private lands found beneficial for retaining birds in pressured landscapes.

FUNDING & FEDERAL PARTNERSHIPS

- Address proposed federal funding cuts for National Wildlife Refuge system and NAWCA. Encourage stakeholder support for policy advocacy initiatives.

Table 1: *Summary of Problems and Possible Solutions to major problems discussed by participants in the April 27 Duck Summit.*

PROBLEM	SOLUTION / APPROACH
Release Mallards / Genetic Influence	Legislative Change
Corn Ponds / Redistribution of Ducks	Research and Legislative Change
Disturbance / Mud Motors	Legislative Change
Crowding on Public Waters	None offered
Hunter Etiquette	Hunter Education
	Self-Policing
Timing of Season	Zones / Splits through regulations

PROBLEM	SOLUTION / APPROACH
National Wildlife Refuge Budgets	Advocacy
Federal Migratory Bird Office Budget	Advocacy
Lack of Enforcement of Existing Laws	Greater enforcement during duck season
Lack of Public Opportunity	Add opportunity through lease or purchase
Pressure / Disturbance to ducks	Limited access areas
	Limit mud motors
Black-bellied whistling duck opportunity	Expand opportunity
	Regulation change
Changing / severe weather patterns and events	No solution
	Seek inland opportunity

WATERFOWL PERMIT (DUCK STAMP) PROGRAM AND FUNDING

ESTABLISHED:

- 1981; increased from $5.50 (1981 to 2022) to $15.50 (2023); generates ~$650,000/year.

SPENDING BREAKDOWN (FY27 PROPOSALS):

- $250,000+ directly to WMAs; remaining funds to fall flights (breeding grounds), outreach/education (notably wood duck box program), research, management, and equipment/materials.
- Current revenue does not fully match modern management costs but is critical for operation of Category 1 and Category 2 areas.
- Statutory “sunset” set for December 31, 2027— Migratory Waterfowl Permit (Duck Stamp) fee and funding levels will revert unless re-authorized by the General Assembly. Without legislative action, on December 31, 2027, the Migratory Waterfowl Permit fee will revert from the current cost of $15.50 to the previous cost of $5.50, resulting in a loss of approximately $400,000 of revenue dedicated to waterfowl management and habitat enhancement in South Carolina.

OUTREACH, EDUCATION AND FUTURE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

CURRENT STATE INITIATIVES:

- SCDNR facilitates regular Waterfowl Advisory Committee meetings (quarterly, public), web-based survey input, and targeted event invitations (but public hunters noted under-representation at summit-style forums).
- Active digital and print outreach about habitat status, management activities, and regulations (QR codes on latest reports/agendas).
- Workshops for private landowners

ACTION ITEMS

FOR SCDNR AND PARTNERS:

1. LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY:

- Prepare and distribute a summary report (from this summit) to state legislators, especially regarding:
- Duck Stamp reauthorization (before 12/31/2027).

2. DATA/RESEARCH EXPANSION:

- Pursue development of statewide/regional bird surveys — especially to track migration timing, disturbance effects, and regional population shifts.

3. HUNTER EDUCATION EXPANSION:

4. HABITAT ENHANCEMENT AND LAND ACQUISITION:

5. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

- Plan for broader outreach in future summits (social media and website notices, possibility of evening/weekend/virtual or regional meetings).

FOR ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS:

- Public hunters encouraged to attend quarterly Waterfowl Advisory Committee meetings (dates posted on SCDNR website).
- Advocacy by individuals and partner organizations to state legislators for necessary legal changes (mallard release, duck stamp fee reauthorization, habitat funding).

FOLLOW-UP POINTS

- Summit notes/report will be compiled, published, and shared with attendees/legislators/partners.

NOTE:

The above summary seeks to capture the full extent and details of discussions, decisions, stakeholder viewpoints, and planned action from the South Carolina Duck Summit held on April 27, 2026.